

Government and society

The year 1485 has usually been taken to mark the end of the Middle Ages in England. Of course, nobody at the time would have seen it as such. There was no reason to think that the new King Henry VII would rule over a country any different from the one ruled over by Richard III. Before looking at the changes in England under the House of Tudor it might be worth looking back at some of the main social developments that had taken place in the late Middle Ages.

Society was still based upon rank. At the top were dukes, earls and other lords, although there were far fewer as a result of war. Below these great lords were knights. Most knights, even by Edward I's time, were no longer heavily armed fighters on horses. They were "gentlemen farmers" or "landed gentry" who had increased the size of their landholdings, and improved their farming methods. This class had grown in numbers. Edward I had ordered that all those with an income of £20 a year must be made knights. This meant that even some

of the yeoman farmers became part of the “landed gentry”, while many “esquires”, who had served knights in earlier times, now became knights themselves. The word “esquire” became common in written addresses, and is only now slowly beginning to be used less.

Next to the gentlemen were the ordinary freemen of the towns. By the end of the Middle Ages, it was possible for a serf from the countryside to work for seven years in a town craft guild, and to become a “freeman” of the town where he lived. The freemen controlled the life of a town. Towns offered to poor men the chance to become rich and successful through trade. The most famous example of this was Dick Whittington. The story tells how he arrived in London as a poor boy from the

countryside, and became a successful merchant and Lord Mayor of London three times. Whittington was, actually, the son of a knight. He was probably an example of the growing practice of the landed families of sending younger sons to town to join a merchant or craft guild. At the same time, many successful merchant families were doing the opposite thing, and obtaining farmland in the countryside. These two classes, the landed gentry and the town merchants, were beginning to overlap.

In the beginning the guilds had been formed to protect the production or trade of a whole town. Later, they had come to protect those already enjoying membership, or who could afford to buy it, from the poorer classes in the same town. As

they did not have the money or family connections to become members of the guilds, the poorer skilled workers tried to join together to protect their own interests. These were the first efforts to form a trade union. Several times in the fourteenth century skilled workers tried unsuccessfully to protect themselves against the power of the guilds. The lives of skilled workers were hard, but they did not suffer as much as the unskilled, who lived in poor and dirty conditions. However, even the condition of the poorest workers in both town and country was better than it had been a century earlier.

In fact, the guilds were declining in importance because of a new force in the national economy. During the fourteenth century a number of English merchants established trading stations, "factories", in different places in Europe. The merchant organisations necessary to operate these factories became important at a national level, and began to replace the old town guilds as the most powerful trading institutions. However, they copied the aims and methods of the guilds, making sure English merchants could only export through their factories, and making sure that prices and quality were maintained.

One of the most important of these factories was the "Company of the Staple" in Calais. The "staple" was an international term used by merchants and governments meaning that certain goods could only be sold in particular places. Calais became the "staple" for all English wool at the end of the fourteenth century when it defeated rival English factories in other foreign cities. The staple was an arrangement which suited the established merchants, as it prevented competition, and it also suited the Crown, which could tax exports more easily. The other important company was called the "Merchant Adventurers". During the fourteenth century there had been several Merchant

Adventurers' factories in a number of foreign towns. But all of them, except for the Merchant Adventurers in Antwerp, Flanders, closed during the fifteenth century. The Antwerp Merchant Adventurers' factory survived because of its sole control of cloth exports, a fact recognised by royal charter.

Wages for farmworkers and for skilled townspeople rose faster than the price of goods in the fifteenth century. There was plenty of meat and cereal prices were low. But there were warning signs of problems ahead. More and more good land was being used for sheep instead of food crops. Rich and powerful sheep farmers started to fence in land which had

always been used by other villagers. In the sixteenth century this led to social and economic crisis.

Meanwhile, in the towns, a new middle class was developing. By the fifteenth century most merchants were well educated, and considered themselves to be the equals of the esquires and gentlemen of the countryside. The lawyers were another class of city people. In London they were considered equal in importance to the big merchants and cloth manufacturers. When law schools were first established, student lawyers lived in inns on the western side of the City of London while they studied. Slowly these inns became part of the law schools, just as the student accommodation halls of Oxford and Cambridge eventually became the colleges of these two universities.

By the end of the Middle Ages the more successful of these lawyers, merchants, cloth manufacturers, exporters, esquires, gentlemen and yeoman farmers were increasingly forming a single class of people with interests in both town and country. This was also true in Wales and Scotland. A number of Welsh landowners came to England; some studied at Oxford, and some traded, or practised law in London. Fewer Scots came to England, because they had their own universities, and their own trade centres of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen.

The growth of this new middle class, educated and skilled in law, administration and trade, created a new atmosphere in Britain. This was partly because of the increase in literacy. Indeed, the middle class could be described as the "literate class". This literate class questioned the way in which the Church and the state were organised, for both religious and practical reasons. On the religious side support for Wycliffe came mainly from members of this new middle class, who believed it was their right to read the Bible in the English language. They disliked serfdom partly because it was now increasingly viewed as unchristian; but also for the practical reason that it was not economic. The middle class also questioned the value of the feudal system because it did not create wealth.

The development of Parliament at this time showed the beginnings of a new relationship between the middle class and the king. Edward I had invited knights from the country and merchants from the towns to his parliament because he wanted money and they, more than any other group, could provide it. But when Edward III asked for money from his parliament, they asked to see the royal accounts. It was an important development because for the first time the king allowed himself to be "accountable" to Parliament. Merchants and country gentlemen were very anxious to influence the king's policies both at home and abroad. They wanted to protect their interests. When France threatened the wool trade with Flanders, for example, they supported Edward III in his war.

During the time of Edward III's reign Parliament became organised in two parts: the Lords, and the Commons, which represented the middle class. Only those commoners with an income of forty shillings or more a year could qualify to be members of Parliament. This meant that the poor had no way of being heard except by rebellion. The poor had no voice of their own in Parliament until the middle of the nineteenth century.

The alliance between esquires and merchants made Parliament more powerful, and separated the Commons more and more from the Lords. Many European countries had the same kind of parliaments at this time, but in most cases these disappeared when feudalism died out. In England, however, the death of feudalism helped strengthen the House of Commons in Parliament.

There was another important change that had taken place in the country. Kings had been taking law cases away from local lords' courts since the twelfth century, and by the middle of the fourteenth century the courts of local lords no longer existed. But the king's courts could not deal with all the work. In 1363 Edward III appointed "justices of the peace" to deal with smaller crimes and offences, and to hold court four times a year.

These JPs, as they became known, were usually less important lords or members of the landed gentry. They were, and still are, chosen for their fairness

and honesty. The appointment of landed gentry as JPs made the middle classes, that class of people who were neither nobles nor peasants, still stronger. Through the system of JPs the landed gentry took the place of the nobility as the local authority. During the Wars of the Roses the nobles used their private armies to force JPs and judges to do what they wanted. But this was the last time the nobility in Britain tried to destroy the authority of the king. The JPs remained the only form of local government in the countryside until 1888. They still exist to deal with small offences.

The condition of women

Little is known about the life of women in the Middle Ages, but without doubt it was hard. The Church taught that women should obey their husbands. It also spread two very different ideas about women: that they should be pure and holy like the Virgin Mary; and that, like Eve, they could not be trusted and were a moral danger to men. Such religious teaching led men both to worship and also to look down on women, and led women to give in to men's authority.

Marriage was usually the single most important event in the lives of men and women. But the decision itself was made by the family, not the couple themselves. This was because by marriage a family could improve its wealth and social position. Everyone, both rich and poor, married for mainly financial reasons. Once married, a woman had to accept her husband as her master. A disobedient wife was usually beaten. It is unlikely that love played much of a part in most marriages.

The first duty of every wife was to give her husband children, preferably sons. Because so many children died as babies, and because there was little that could be done if a birth went wrong, producing children was dangerous and exhausting. Yet this was the future for every wife from twenty or younger until she was forty.

The wife of a noble had other responsibilities. When her lord was away, she was in charge of the manor and the village lands, all the servants and

villagers, the harvest and the animals. She also had to defend the manor if it was attacked. She had to run the household, welcome visitors, and store enough food, including salted meat, for winter. She was expected to have enough knowledge of herbs and plants to make suitable medicines for those in the village who were sick. She probably visited the poor and the sick in the village, showing that the

rulers “cared” for them. She had little time for her own children, who in any case were often sent away at the age of eight to another manor, the boys to “be made into men”.

Most women, of course, were peasants, busy making food, making cloth and making clothes from the cloth. They worked in the fields, looked after the children, the geese, the pigs and the sheep, made the cheese and grew the vegetables. The animals probably shared the family shelter at night. The family home was dark and smelly.

A woman’s position improved if her husband died. She could get control of the money her family had given the husband at the time of marriage, usually about one-third of his total land and wealth. But she might have to marry again: men wanted her land, and it was difficult to look after it without the help of a man.

Language and culture

With the spread of literacy, cultural life in Britain naturally developed also. In the cities, plays were performed at important religious festivals. They were called “mystery plays” because of the mysterious nature of events in the Bible, and they were a popular form of culture. In the larger cities some guilds made themselves responsible for particular plays, which became traditional yearly events.

The language itself was changing. French had been used less and less by the Norman rulers during the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century Edward III had actually forbidden the speaking of French in his army. It was a way of making the whole army aware of its Englishness.

After the Norman Conquest English (the old Anglo-Saxon language) continued to be spoken by ordinary people but was no longer written. By the end of the fourteenth century, however, English was once again a written language, because it was being used instead of French by the ruling, literate class. But “Middle English”, the language of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was very different from Anglo-Saxon. This was partly because it had not been written for three hundred years, and partly because it had borrowed so much from Norman French.

Two writers, above all others, helped in the rebirth of English literature. One was William Langland, a mid-fourteenth century priest, whose poem *Piers Plowman* gives a powerful description of the times in which he lived. The other, Geoffrey Chaucer, has become much more famous. He lived at about the same time as Langland. His most famous work was *The Canterbury Tales*, written at the end of the fourteenth century.

The Canterbury Tales describe a group of pilgrims travelling from London to the tomb of Thomas Becket at Canterbury, a common religious act in England in the Middle Ages. During the journey each character tells a story. Collections of stories were popular at this time because almost all literature, unlike today, was written to be read out

aloud. The stories themselves are not Chaucer's own. He used old stories, but rewrote them in an interesting and amusing way. The first chapter, in which he describes his characters, is the result of Chaucer's own deep understanding of human nature. It remains astonishingly fresh even after six hundred years. It is a unique description of a nation: young and old, knight and peasant, priest and merchant, good and bad, townsman and countryman. Here is part of Chaucer's description (in a modernised version) of the knight, and his son, the squire:

There was a *knight*, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
Truth, honour, generousness and courtesy . . .
He had his son with him, a fine young *squire*,
A lover and cadet, a lad of fire
With locks as curly as if they had been pressed.
He was some twenty years of age, I guessed . . .
He was embroidered like a meadow bright
And full of freshest flowers, red and white.
Singing he was, or fluting all the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of May.
Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and
wide;
He knew the way to sit a horse and ride.
He could make songs and poems and recite,
Knew how to joust and dance, to draw and write.
He loved so hotly that till dawn grew pale
He slept as little as a nightingale.

By the end of the Middle Ages, English as well as Latin was being used in legal writing, and also in elementary schools. Education developed enormously during the fifteenth century, and many schools were founded by powerful men. One of these was William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester and Lord Chancellor of England, who founded both Winchester School, in 1382, and New College, Oxford. Like Henry VI's later foundations at Eton and Cambridge they have remained famous for their high quality. Many other schools were also opened at this time, because there was a growing need for educated people who could administer the government, the Church, the law and trade. Clerks started grammar schools where students could learn the skills of reading and writing. These schools offered their pupils a future in the Church or the civil service, or at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The universities themselves continued to grow as colleges and halls where the students could both live and be taught were built. The college system remains the basis of organisation in these two universities.

The Middle Ages ended with a major technical development: William Caxton's first English printing press, set up in 1476. Caxton had learnt the skill of printing in Germany. At first he printed popular books, such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. This prose work described the adventures of the legendary King Arthur, including Arthur's last battle, his death, and the death of other knights of the Round Table. Almost certainly Malory had in mind the destruction of the English nobility in the Wars of the Roses, which were taking place as he wrote.

Caxton's printing press was as dramatic for his age as radio, television and the technological revolution are for our own. Books suddenly became cheaper and more plentiful, as the quicker printing process replaced slow and expensive copywriting by hand. Printing began to standardise spelling and grammar, though this process was a long one. More important, just as radio brought information and ideas to the illiterate people of the twentieth century, Caxton's press provided books for the

newly educated people of the fifteenth century, and encouraged literacy. Caxton avoided printing any dangerous literature. But the children and grandchildren of these literate people were to use printing as a powerful weapon to change the world in which they lived.